

Gastroesophageal Reflux (GERD)

Gastroesophageal reflux, also known as acid reflux, occurs when the stomach contents reflux or back up into the esophagus and/or mouth. Reflux is a normal process that occurs in healthy infants, children, and adults. Most episodes are brief and do not cause bothersome symptoms or complications.

In contrast, people with gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) experience bothersome symptoms as a result of the reflux. Symptoms can include heartburn, regurgitation, vomiting, and difficulty or pain with swallowing. The reflux of stomach acid can adversely affect the vocal cords causing hoarseness or even be inhaled into the lungs (called aspiration).

WHAT IS GASTROESOPHAGEAL REFLUX?

When we eat, food is carried from the mouth to the stomach through the esophagus, a tube-like structure that is approximately 10 inches long and 1 inch wide in adults. The esophagus is made of tissue and muscle layers that expand and contract to propel food to the stomach through a series of wave-like movements called peristalsis.

At the lower end of the esophagus, where it joins the stomach, there is a circular ring of muscle called the lower esophageal sphincter (LES). After swallowing, the LES relaxes to allow food to enter the stomach and then contracts to prevent the back-up of food and acid into the esophagus.

However, sometimes the LES is weak or becomes relaxed because the stomach is distended, allowing liquids in the stomach to wash back into the esophagus. This happens occasionally in all individuals. Most of these episodes occur shortly after meals, are brief, and do not cause symptoms. Normally, acid reflux should occur only rarely during sleep.

Acid reflux — Acid reflux becomes gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) when it causes bothersome symptoms or injury to the esophagus. The amount of acid reflux required to cause GERD varies.

In general, damage to the esophagus is more likely to occur when acid refluxes frequently, the reflux is very acidic, or the esophagus is unable to clear away the acid quickly. The most common symptoms associated with acid reflux are heartburn, regurgitation, chest pain, and trouble swallowing. The treatments of GERD are designed to prevent one or all of these symptoms from occurring.

ACID REFLUX SYMPTOMS

People who experience heartburn at least two to three times a week may have gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GERD. The most common symptom of GERD, heartburn, is estimated to affect 10 million adults in the United States on a daily basis. Heartburn is experienced as a burning sensation in the center of the chest, which sometimes spreads to the throat; there also may be an acid taste in the throat. Less common symptoms include:

- Stomach pain (pain in the upper abdomen)
- Non-burning chest pain
- Difficulty swallowing (called dysphagia), or food getting stuck
- Painful swallowing (called odynophagia)
- Persistent laryngitis/hoarseness
- Persistent sore throat
- Chronic cough, new onset asthma, or asthma only at night
- Regurgitation of foods/fluids; taste of acid in the throat
- Sense of a lump in the throat
- Waking up with a choking sensation



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When to seek help — The following signs and symptoms may indicate a more serious problem, and should be reported to a healthcare provider immediately:

- Difficulty or pain with swallowing (feeling that food gets "stuck")
- Unexplained weight loss
- Chest pain
- Choking
- Bleeding (vomiting blood or dark-colored stools)

REFLUX TREATMENT

Gastroesophageal reflux disease is treated according to its severity.

Mild symptoms — Initial treatments for mild acid reflux include dietary changes and using non-prescription medications, including antacids or histamine antagonists.

Lifestyle changes — Changes to the diet or lifestyle have been recommended for many years, although their effectiveness has not been extensively evaluated in well-designed clinical trials. A review of the literature concluded that weight loss and elevating the head of your bed may be helpful, but other dietary changes were not found helpful in all patients. Thus, these recommendations may be helpful in some, but not all people with mild symptoms of acid reflux.

For people with mild acid reflux, these treatments can be tried before seeking medical attention. However, anyone with more serious symptoms should speak to their healthcare provider before using any treatment.

- **Weight loss** – Losing weight may help people who are overweight to reduce acid reflux. In addition, weight loss has a number of other health benefits, including a decreased risk of type 2 diabetes and heart disease.
- **Raise the head of the bed six to eight inches** – Although most people only have heartburn for the two- to three-hour period after meals, some wake up at night with heartburn. People with nighttime heartburn can elevate the head of their bed, which raises the head and shoulders higher than the stomach, allowing gravity to prevent acid from refluxing. Raising the head of the bed can be done with blocks of wood under the legs of the bed or a foam wedge under the mattress. Several manufacturers have developed commercial products for this purpose. However, it is not helpful to use additional pillows; this can cause an unnatural bend in the body that increases pressure on the stomach, worsening acid reflux.
- **Avoid acid reflux-inducing foods** – Some foods also cause relaxation of the lower esophageal sphincter, promoting acid reflux. Excessive caffeine, chocolate, alcohol, peppermint, and fatty foods may cause bothersome acid reflux in some people.
- **Quit smoking** – Saliva helps to neutralize refluxed acid, and smoking reduces the amount of saliva in the mouth and throat. Smoking also lowers the pressure in the lower esophageal sphincter and provokes coughing, causing frequent episodes of acid reflux in the esophagus. Quitting smoking can reduce or eliminate symptoms of mild reflux.
- **Avoid large and late meals** – Lying down with a full stomach may increase the risk of acid reflux. By eating three or more hours before bedtime, reflux may be reduced. In addition, eating smaller meals may prevent the stomach from becoming overdistended, which can cause acid reflux.
- **Chew gum or use oral lozenges** – Chewing gum or using lozenges can increase saliva production, which may help to clear stomach acid that has entered the esophagus.

Antacids — Antacids are commonly used for short-term relief of acid reflux. However, the stomach acid is only neutralized very briefly after each dose, so they are not very effective. Examples of antacids include Tums, Maalox, and Mylanta.